INFORMATION NOTE:

UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN EL SALVADOR (ONUSAL)

Headquarters
San Salvador

Date operational
26 July 1991

Personnel
135 civilian, police and military personnel

Chief of Mission
Mr. Iqbal Riza (Pakistan)

Director for Human Rights
Dr. Philippe Texier (France)

Historical Background

On 26 July 1990, the Government of El Salvador and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) signed, in San José, Costa Rica, an agreement of vital importance to the solution of the decade-long Salvadorian conflict - the Agreement on Human Rights. This was the first substantive achievement of a complex negotiating process which has been conducted by the parties under the auspices of the United Nations Secretary-General. The objective of the on-going negotiations, initiated by the Government of El Salvador and FMLN in September 1989, has been to achieve a series of political agreements aimed at ending the armed conflict by political means as speedily as possible, promoting democratization in the country, guaranteeing unrestricted respect for human rights and reunifying Salvadorian society. It is envisaged that implementation of all agreements that may be signed between the two parties will be subject to verification by the United Nations.[1]

The Agreement on Human Rights provided for the establishment of a United Nations verification mission to monitor nationwide respect for and the guarantee of human rights and fundamental freedoms in El Salvador. According to the Agreement, the Mission was to take up its duties as of the cessation of the armed conflict. Shortly after signing the Agreement, however, the two parties independently requested that the Mission be set up without waiting for a cease-fire.

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In December 1990, the Secretary-General informed the Security Council of his intention to propose the establishment of the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador to begin verification of the Agreement. In March 1991, the Secretary-General sent a preliminary mission to help him determine the extent to which verification activities could be conducted before the cessation of the armed conflict. In its report to the Secretary-General, the mission concluded that the human rights component of ONUSAL could be established before a cease-fire.

Establishment of ONUSAL

On 20 May 1991, following the Secretary-General's recommendation, the Security Council, by its resolution 693 (1991), decided to establish ONUSAL to monitor all agreements concluded between the Government of El Salvador and FMLN. The Mission's initial mandate, in its first phase as an integrated peace-keeping operation, is to verify the compliance by the parties with the San José Agreement on Human Rights.

At this stage, the tasks of the Mission include actively monitoring the human rights situation in El Salvador; investigating specific cases of alleged human rights violations; promoting human rights in the country; making recommendations to eliminate violations; and reporting to the Secretary-General and, through him, to the United Nations Security Council and the General Assembly.

Under the San José Agreement, ONUSAL has the power to investigate cases and situations existing as from the date of its establishment, to draw conclusions therefrom and to make whatever recommendations it deems relevant. The broad powers conferred on the Mission include the possibility of visiting any place or establishment freely and without prior notice; receiving communications from any Salvadorian individual, group or entity and interviewing freely any individual or group; conducting direct investigations; and using the media to the extent useful for the

1/ For more background information, see: "The peace process in El Salvador and the United Nations", DPI/1149A (ONUSAL Press Kit).

fulfilment of its mandate. The Agreement thus assigns to the Mission a role unprecedented in the history of the United Nations.

ONUSAL Activities

ONUSAL was launched on 26 July 1991, at which time it absorbed a small preparatory office established in San Salvador in January. In assuming its tasks, ONUSAL adopted a two-phase approach. During the preparatory phase, which ended on 30 September, ONUSAL set up its regional offices and laid the operational and conceptual bases for its future work. ONUSAL teams travelled all over the country, making contacts with political, judicial and military authorities at the local, regional and national levels, as well as with organizations representing civilian society and others whose activities are relevant to the Mission's mandate. Despite the difficulties created by the continuing conflict, ONUSAL also made its first contacts in the field with FMLN. It used the preparatory phase to familiarize itself with national institutions, problems related to the armed conflict, and the situation of human rights in the country. During this phase, the Mission also received the first complaints of alleged human rights violations, which it followed up on a preliminary basis.

On 1 October, ONUSAL entered its second phase of operations in which it began to investigate cases and situations involving human rights violations and to follow them up systematically with the competent State organs. The Mission has also maintained an ongoing dialogue with FMLN concerning its alleged violations of the San José Agreement. The purpose of all these activities has been to establish that allegations are true, to find out what action has been taken to punish those responsible and to prevent such violations in future.

During this phase, ONUSAL has significantly expanded its contacts with the parties, establishing flexible, stable coordination mechanisms with them. For instance, it holds regular working meetings with an inter-agency group of the Salvadorian Government. It also holds regular coordination meetings at the highest level with the main State organs. In addition, it has expanded its local and regional contacts with the main political, judicial and military authorities. It also holds periodic coordination meetings at Mexico City or Managua with the FMLN Political and Diplomatic Commission and has ongoing functional contacts with local FMLN leaders inside the country. ONUSAL has also set up coordination mechanisms with non-governmental human rights organizations in order to take advantage of the existence of common and complementary areas of activity. In addition, the Mission has initiated both a human rights educational programme and an information campaign to inform the public about the role of ONUSAL in the country.

ONUSAL Structure and Composition

The Office of the Chief of Mission provides overall political direction and deals with political matters that arise from the performance of the verification functions. It has also been preparing for the establishment of additional components of ONUSAL consequent to further political agreements that may be signed between the Government and FMLN. The Office of the Director for Human Rights is responsible for verifying the San José Agreement. The Director is assisted by a team of human rights advisers and investigators and by legal and police advisers. It also includes a team of educators on human rights issues.

ONUSAL has deployed its personnel around the country with headquarters in San Salvador, regional offices in the capital, Santa Ana, San Vicente and San Miguel, and sub-regional offices in Chalatenango and Usulutan. Each of the regional offices is headed by a regional coordinator, assisted by human rights observers, legal officers, police investigators, military liaison officers and a political affairs officer.

As of November 1991, ONUSAL consisted of 135 international staff from 31 countries. This number included 57 human rights observers and advisers, legal advisers, educators and political affairs officers; 15 military liaison officers; 27 police advisers; and 36 administrative support and communications staff.

Financial Aspects

The General Assembly authorized the appropriation of $13.8 million to finance ONUSAL's first six months, from 1 July through 31 December 1991. The Assembly also authorized the Secretary-General to enter into commitments for an amount not exceeding $9.2 million to cover the Mission's costs for a further six-month period, from 1 January to 30 June 1992.

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